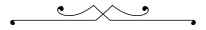
Fall 2013

More Than Things

Margaret Randall



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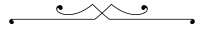

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Set in Adobe Garamond Pro by Laura Wellington.
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This book is for Robert Schweitzer, wise friend

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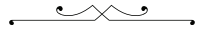
Introduction

The Magical Seam

Just about anything gets me started: thinking back over a lifetime of politics, writing, or even sex; connection with a child or grandchild; my great good fortune in having found the perfect life companion; a conversation with a friend; a myth or fairy tale; a journey to some part of the world I had no idea exists in the particular sociocultural configuration I find when I get there; an ancient ruin; one of the many criminal acts—large and small—that our government and corporations try to pass off as necessary to our national security and the well-being of our communities; or the magical seam where water and rock come together on the Colorado River.

These pieces range from personal narratives to more traditional essays, passing through a few dreamlike prosodies. They move from mentors and a contemplation of the issue of suicide, through social mores and governmental criminality, to travel and my writing life. Meridel LeSueur's last poem is like a gift from the beyond, and I riffed on it with immense gratitude. All these texts were written over a three-year period between 2009 and 2012. They are not presented in the order in which they were written but rather arranged so that a concern in one is sometimes continued in the next.

I think of these pieces as my end of an ongoing conversation. I hope they will spark response.



More Than Things

Shaping My Words

for Silvia Gil

One balmy Havana night, toward the end of 1980, the man with whom I was apprenticing as a novice photographer, a couple of others who shared my makeshift darkroom, and I were spreading an evening's worth of prints across our large dining room table to dry. I was looking critically at my images when the phone rang. I no longer remember who called, but the expression on the face of my friend who answered remains with me after all these years: profound sorrow tinged with horror and the hesitant shadow of some other emotion that seemed caught midair between nervous apprehension and an understanding that defied immediate release.

Haydée Santamaría—revolutionary heroine, member of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee, visionary president of the country's important cultural institution Casa de las Américas, and beloved friend to all creative artists who had ever met or found themselves in her presence—was dead. Dead. It took a few moments of stunned silence for the reality to sink in.

The caller said Haydée's body was lying in state at a nearby funeral parlor. There was no question we would walk the few blocks and join what we knew would be an enormous crowd of grievers. No reach of imagination could predict how large or how intense. As I mechanically positioned the last of my prints on the table and hurriedly dried my hands, I looked to my friend who had answered the phone. I wanted to know what he hadn't been able to bring

himself to say in that first shocking outburst. Macías couldn't meet my eyes as he responded to my silent question: "She shot herself."

Suicide is always problematic for those left behind, who cannot approach the emotional state of the person ending her or his life. *Radio bembá*, or gossip, travels hurricane fast throughout Cuba's popular culture. Before daybreak, this sort of news would invade every home on the island. It was an event that would elicit a far deeper response than some unexpected change to our food ration book, an attack from the ever-aggressive enemy to the north, or the loss of almost any other beloved public figure—with the exception of Fidel. As far as any of us knew, Haydée was in good health and vibrant with ongoing projects. Her decision to end her life shook us profoundly. It felt personal, and also deeply troubling in a larger, more overarching sense.

This was a woman who embodied all that was promising about the revolution: its uniquely Cuban roots and risk, its brilliance, creativity, and passion, a genuine appreciation of difference, and the authority to journey where others didn't know enough or didn't have the courage to go. One of only two women among 135 combatants who participated in the 1953 attack on Moncada Barracks, she had been imprisoned following that failed attempt. Most of her comrades died in the brief battle or were tortured to death in its aftermath. She lost her brother and her lover, along with dozens of close friends. Her narrative of the debacle, *Haydée habla del Moncada*, is one of the Cuban Revolution's most moving and iconic texts.[1]

Many of the surviving Moncada veterans died during subsequent decades; fewer and fewer remained. But each year, as July 26 approached, those few would dutifully make the rounds of schools, workplaces, and military units, telling their collective story, trying to keep the history alive, and providing some continuity for younger generations engaged in a stage of social change that was less dramatic but much more difficult to achieve. It was Che who said winning the war was the easy part. Only a few weeks before her death, Haydée had spoken at the office where one of my friends worked. Later, in the restroom, that friend overheard her murmuring: "I just can't do this again . . . I can't."

Over the ensuing weeks and months, two popular explanations for Haydée's decision became common currency on the streets of Havana. The first was the emotional strain of having lived through so many years of terror and loss, what today we call posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Maybe she had finally reached her limit. It was also rumored that her recent marital separation and the fact that her husband had remarried a younger woman were to blame. People won-

dered and came up with these and other possible reasons to try to satisfy their need for answers.

I bought none of them.

I knew Haydée only slightly, although I loved and admired her beyond our casual friendship. We had met on my very first visit to Cuba in 1967, and from that moment on she personified to me not what the Cuban Revolution was but what it could be—free of competing power struggles, inevitable errors, occasional repressive periods, greed, and pockets of corruption. On Haydée's lips revolution seemed simple and exuberantly creative. It meant justice and a better life for every person. Her goodness and imagination refused to recognize the limits imposed by underdevelopment, a corrosively tropical climate, small minds, petty jealousies, or even the U.S. blockade.

We exchanged letters, and I sent her snapshots of my children. After I moved to Cuba in 1969, she once impulsively took me to see those pictures tacked up inside her bedroom closet door. I interviewed her at length for my first book about Cuban women.[2] That interview is as cutting-edge in 2011 as it was in 1970. She coerced me into being a judge for the country's biggest beauty contest, and when I complained that she had forced me into something she must have known I detested, she smiled and admitted she'd done it because she knew I would use the occasion to find a way to help bring such contests to an end. We both suffered sudden and devastating asthma attacks, which she patiently taught me to manage so they would rob me of as little daily energy as possible.

At her wake, among hundreds of other mourners pressed together in the heat of that keening Havana night, someone asked if I would like to stand guard at the head of her open coffin. Family, public figures, and friends were taking two-minute shifts. At a certain point, I lowered my eyes to Haydée's reconstructed face. It may have been at that moment that the seed of this essay was born. Since then I have known other suicides, of course—some slow, some fast, some of very close friends—but something about Haydée's choice and what I believe may have been behind it has stayed with me to this day.

As the funeral parlor filled and crowds overflowed into the street, an unsettled sentiment surfaced in many conversations. Why was this wake being held at a commercial establishment rather than where other heroes and heroines were mourned in Revolution Square? It was a rhetorical question. We knew the answer: the Communist Party, like the Catholic Church, disapproved of suicide; in the former, one's life belonged to the people—in the latter, to God.

Haydée was being punished for her act. But popular disagreement with the decision became more and more evident. By morning, in an obvious gesture of atonement, she was carried with full honors to the section of Colón Cemetery designated for the nation's beloved sons and daughters.

It's not that I want to dwell on suicide. I don't feel that it solves any but the most personal of dilemmas. It is an individual choice though, and one I respect even as it often makes me rage and weep.

What I want to write about today is this time in which we find ourselves: a time of such perverted values, sanctioned violence, greed, and corruption perpetrated by governments, armies, corporations, and individuals—a social distortion so powerful it seems it cannot be stopped. It is a time that has certainly made me contemplate the possibility of leaving and enabled me to understand why some make that choice.

I confess there are moments when I am glad my generous and justice-loving father didn't live to witness this world he would have found so hard to accept, and times as well when I myself can imagine the peace of oblivion.

Then I think of my grandchildren.

We have reached a moment in human evolution that foretells an uncertain future at best, and a future that in palpable ways is already here. It is a future that shows its voracious fangs and seems to mock our attempts to pursue a course that favors a culture of life over one of death.

When it comes to climate change, those in power have all but brought our earth to a point of no return. When it comes to war, there are always new ones to wage, and old ones we must continue fighting because our country's skewed sense of patriotism goes where reason no longer resides. When it comes to economic survival, everyone but the rich and entitled are expendable. Workers are replaced by machines or by their counterparts in other countries who will labor for less and in worse conditions. Then they are simply downsized en masse because, well, the country is suffering an "economic downturn" (read: recession, depression, what you will). It can't be helped. Despite periodic exposés, I know those responsible will never be held accountable.

When it comes to shelter, the United States is showing the world how corporate interests get away with luring people into buying houses they cannot afford and then punishing them with eviction when they are unable to pay their mortgages. When it comes to health and public education and caring for the elderly, there's no money for any of that, because we're spending it all on war. And so it goes, in a disintegrating and out-of-control downward spiral.

What can we do to break the cycle? Where can we sink our teeth into viable forms of resistance?

Many in the United States believe that in our democratic system we can vote our way out of the morass and that our democracy should be eagerly embraced by peoples everywhere. But to even get on a ballot in our country today one must first be able to raise billions of campaign dollars and then feel comfortable telling obscene lies about others and making promises impossible to keep. Political interests are such that it is irrelevant to ask if politicians are breaking promises because they are forced to or out of unadulterated deceit.

I am almost seventy-seven and have only once had the opportunity to vote for, rather than against, a presidential candidate. My exercise of suffrage started with a 1960 vote against Nixon. I am ashamed to say I thought it would be different with Obama; for a very short time, it felt good to have finally voted for a candidate about whom I could get excited.

Al Qaeda chalked up a victory on September 11, 2001, far beyond taking the lives of three thousand men and women and devastating treasure in its three coordinated attacks. The element of surprise caught the United States off guard, and there are arguments that claim there was no way we could have avoided that aspect of the tragedy.

The other part—ongoing, ruthless, and threatening to destroy everything our nation is supposed to stand for—we brought and bring on ourselves. I am talking about the Bush administration's refusal to look at why a crazed fundamentalist faction of Islam would attack us as it did and that administration's preemptive declaration of war against a country that had nothing to do with the assault. I am talking about a government's rash decision to limit personal freedoms. And I am talking about Obama's continuation of his predecessor's racist and national security-centered policies, which only deepen the divide between "them" and "us."[3]

You may be wondering why I begin with a suicide and then offer my hopeless reading of what I perceive as power politics gone mad.

My question is, what can we do? Realistically, what can those of us in the United States who despise U.S. exceptionalism, war, and the arrogance of nation building do to end our military's presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and so many other places where lack of trustworthy news keeps a naïve public unaware of our belligerent involvement?

What can we do to save Medicare, Medicaid, education, arts, and other social services already compromised and pitifully meager when compared with those

provided as rights in most of the industrially advanced countries? What can we do to preserve what's left of our public education system and work toward universal health care? What can we do to keep gains such as freedom of dissent and women's reproductive rights—won through such intense and costly struggles—when they are being eroded each day by legions of Bible-thumping, Tea Partying crazies? What can we do so our nation may truly become a place where all its citizens—of all races, genders, and ideas—can feel at home?

I link suicide and our government's grotesquely lopsided value system and set of priorities because, for as long as I can remember, this is the first time I feel a sense of utter defeat about the future. Is "checking out" a real alternative, be it quite literally as Haydée did or figuratively by ceasing to struggle for a better world and simply contenting oneself with "getting by"?

On the thirtieth anniversary of Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers, I was struck by his public reference to the fact that every one of the crimes committed against him by Richard Nixon, crimes that cost Nixon the presidency, are legal today. The Patriot Act has legitimized those crimes and given tacit permission to the justifications behind them, once anathema to American ideals. When this sort of criminality is permitted, indeed encouraged and applauded, where does that leave those of us who have struggled all our lives for justice, peace, and tolerance? Where does it leave our world?

It may leave some of us heading for the exit.

Without claiming any sort of inside track, my poet's intuition has always told me that Haydée Santamaría chose death rather than continuing to live in a society she may, even then, have understood was not living up to the ideals for which her brother and lover gave their lives. PTSD may have played a role. Perhaps her husband's abandonment did as well. But exceptional people are privy to huge hope and generally give up only under exceptional conditions. The PTSD Haydée had lived with for more than twenty years doesn't seem to me to have constituted an exceptional condition; midlife divorce, even less.

No, I believe something weightier and more terrifying than those issues—either or both of which may well have helped tip the balance—pushed Haydée to make her fatal decision. We will never know. Certainly I will never know. I am not aware if she left a note; and if she did, even radio bembá could not have made it public.

By virtue of her history, Haydée belonged to the revolution's inner circle. She knew all the dirty secrets. By virtue of her gender, and perhaps also her visionary quirkiness, she probably had little real power. Did she feel helpless

and alone? When I think of the situation facing us today—the many small and larger obstacles to choosing life over death—Haydée invariably comes to mind. Even taking into account the important differences, I wonder if Cuba back then may have seemed to her like the United States seems to me today: quite simply a disappointment overwhelming enough to cause despair.

Contrary to what you may be thinking, I am not saying that suicide is the answer to profound and reasonable discouragement. I believe in an individual's right to end his or her life, whatever the reason; but I do not confuse that right with a solution to our sociopolitical problems. What I am asking is, what do we do, what can we do, when faced with such weighty evidence that those who would destroy life as we know it are winning on every side?

What we face feels enormous and can seem insurmountable to some. Distraught as I may feel, however, I keep one last card close to my breast. It's not suicide. Neither is it the card that can win the game, but it is one that keeps me playing another hand.

That card is my unique, very loud, and irreplaceable voice.

There is one thing such a voracious enemy cannot take from us, and that is our knowledge of where we come from, our attention to the multiple struggles and what they have cost, and our voices, which, together, weave the image of the harmonious future we may not live to experience. In a scenario such as the one we face, these voices—our voices—become precious beyond description. I remain convinced their combined energy makes a difference.

Lines scrawled on the walls of a Turkish prison. Diaries smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto or a Nazi concentration camp. A song written in Chile's National Stadium, in the horrific days following that country's 1973 coup. Poems and protest songs from Vietnam, Nicaragua, Guatemala. A Native American drum circle, beating the rhythm of hearts that refuse to give up. Spirituals sung by slaves dreaming of freedom. Stories from our own civil rights and women's movements. The child who speaks out against her abuser. The soldier who turns his back on war. Words whispered from mouth to ear, through our long human history of atrocity and resistance.

I am a poet, so when I say voice, I mean that quite literally. But I do not believe poets, or even artists working in other mediums, are the only ones capable of giving voice to a culture of hope and possibility. Scientists who search honestly for answers to the questions that concern us contribute to such a culture. Teachers who help their students discover how to think, health professionals devoted to curing the ill and accompanying the dying, cleaning person-

nel who take pride in their work, and that rare public servant more interested in improving the sustainability of life than in his own narrow status—all these and many others sing in the chorus that still, just possibly, may be able to drown out the death dirge that deafens us today.

When I am tired beyond my ability to protest the lies we are told and the lies we absorb, I do not think of ending my life—to become one less among those who fight the good fight or at least try to preserve the memory of so many good fights, intimate as well as public. I think of how I may whisper or shout, shaping my words into ever-new configurations of a dignity that documents and empowers.